

Time Out

New York

The obsessive guide to impulsive entertainment
March 6-13, 2003 Issue No. 388 \$2.99

EXCLUSIVE! How Ali G. hoodwinked his unsuspecting "talk-show" guests

PLUS Irreversible: The film that's driving audiences to the exits

AND The secret lives of NYC chefs

Going Seine

"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema 2003" chases Gallic greatness By **Stephen Garrett**

One of the most appealing aspects of the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual survey series "Rendez-Vous with French Cinema 2003" is its democratic blend of art films and lowbrow crowd-pleasers. The combination is usually a mixed blessing, and that's true of this year's mélange of strained French farces, twisted insights into the modern condition and wonderful character studies.

Manic-and-mannered comedies based on misunderstandings and deliberate deceptions seem especially popular at the moment in France. Actor-turned-director Michel Blanc delivers one of the survey's popular hits with the hysteric (though far from hysterical) *See How They Run*, an unsatisfying comedy of errors about a vacation retreat, in which delightful divas such as Charlotte Rampling and Carole Bouquet are forced into pained

roles as frustrated wives. Less laden with nagging characters is *C'est le bouquet*, Jeanne Labrune's clever though uninspired study of the chain reaction among friends and strangers when a long-lost lover calls a now-married woman (Sandrine Kiberlain) after 20 years. Most outrageous of all is *My Idol*, Guillaume Canet's



SLICE OF LIFE Marina de Van's hunger knows no bounds in the sharp drama *In My Skin*.

fascinating mess of a movie in which an eager young wanna-be game-show host spends a weekend with his boss, a morally bankrupt TV producer. As a view into the deranged minds of reality-programming gurus, it's priceless—though some may be turned off by its absurdist twists.

Among the more intriguingly extreme views of a modern world gone wrong are a quartet of pictures with haunting messages about humanity. Making an encore appearance at the Walter Reade is *demonlover*, Olivier Assayas's nihilistic drama of industrial espionage and cyberporn, which popped up last month in the "Film Comment Selects" series. Its raw images of physical exploitation linger powerfully. Marina de Van's horrifyingly graphic *In My Skin* is a shudder-to-think exploration of one woman's developing taste for eating her own flesh—an unholy vision indebted to Claire Denis's *Trouble Everyday*. Using a dead bull's body parts as her morbid conceit for interconnecting disparate lives, Delphine Gleize's *Carnage* weaves a technically audacious but preposterously contrived dissection of emotional ennui. And Valérie Guignabodet's *Monique*, though technically a comedy, still registers high on the creep scale with its tale of a cuckolded husband and the

high-end silicone sex doll that he makes his healing companion.

But the most successful movies in *Rendez-Vous* this year strike an exquisite balance between form and content in delivering astute character studies. One of the most stylistically satisfying is Raymond Depardon's *Untouched by the West*, a beautiful b&w reverie that depicts a Saharan native living in an out-of-time culture unspoiled by the modern world. Bittersweet, with a deceptively simple mise-en-scène, is Claude Berri's melancholic May-December romance *Housekeeper*, a remarkably complex study of a middle-aged man whose love life is slowly deteriorating. And most absorbing of all is Julie Lopes-Curval's

Seaside, a multiracial study of the year-round inhabitants of a coastal resort town. The breadth of emotions covered by the drama over a calendar year are enhanced by a subtle but poignant use of the landscape. The film, which won the Camera d'Or at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, is a reminder of how, at its best, French cinema is unparalleled at tapping the essence of humanity in all its forms.

"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema" is at Walter Reade Theater Fri 7 through March 16. See Alternatives & Revivals.